

The American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress
presents
the Benjamin Botkin Folklife Lecture Series

AN ACQUISITIONS & PRESENTATION PROJECT



I'D STILL BE PUERTO RICAN, EVEN IF BORN ON THE MOON:

DOCUMENTING PUERTO RICAN MIGRATION AND COMMUNITY THROUGH THE ARTS

Elena Martínez
City Lore and the Bronx
Music Heritage Center

THURSDAY

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I'd Still Be Puerto Rican, Even if Born on the Moon*

Documenting Puerto Rican Migration and Community Through the Arts

This presentation tells the story of Puerto Rican immigration to New York City during the 20th century and into the 21st through the lens of expressive culture. This history has been extensively recorded, but by drawing on the work of folk and traditional artists as well as the work of contemporary artists, we explore the traditions practiced or developed by Puerto Ricans and Nuyoricans (people of Puerto Rican heritage born and raised in New York).

The arts were and continue to be part of our historical narrative and retain relevance in a society where built-in obsolescence and a “throw-away” mentality are at odds with the maintenance of traditional art forms. The traditional arts of *mundillo* (bobbin lace) and *santos* carving (wood statues of holy figures) are time-intensive in all aspects—learning, preparing and creating—so practitioners are rare (especially in New York City where there just aren't that many masters or teachers to transmit these traditions). Yet these arts remain potent symbols of identity and cultural pride, especially during holidays like

Three Kings' Day. One can also see the significance of the traditional arts in the fledgling resurgence of Puerto Rican music performed by younger generations at *casitas* and other venues in the Bronx and Brooklyn. Where once young Boricuas only played the Afro-Cuban rhythms of *guaguanco* on mass-produced conga drums, now one can hear the rhythms of Puerto Rican *bomba*, such as *yubá* and *sicá*, played on homemade *barrilles*.

Other traditions and practices have developed in New York City that are relevant to life here, and have been widely adopted by younger generation—aerosol art murals, Schwinn bicycle clubs, and “Nuyorican” poetry. Some of these represent traditions that have roots in the island—Schwinn bikes were used there—but have been reinvented to suit the needs of an urban setting. Others, such as “Nuyorican” poetry, mix Puerto Rican roots with other influences; this style creates poetry in Spanglish, English and Spanish, inspired by the *declamador* tradition from the island, and combines it with African-American performance style inflections. These arts reflect the many fusions that occur when groups live in close quarters in neighborhoods throughout the City.

The presentation will also look at another under-recognized dimension of the diaspora: the contribution and leadership in all aspects of life by women migrants. Most of us have heard the stories about or have read the writings of Bernardo Vega and Jesús Colón—and well we should, because their experiences help us to understand what life was like for the pioneers of the community. But at the same time that Bernardo Vega was working in cigar factories, so was Luisa Capetillo, contributing her voice as a *lector* to educate the cigar rollers as they worked. Jesús Colón mentored the young activist Evelina López Antonetty, who would become known as the “Hell Lady

of the Bronx” because she wouldn't let anyone stand in her way of providing social services to the poor communities of the South Bronx.

The politics of these bold women often intersected with culture and art. The pioneering businesswoman from the Brooklyn Puerto Rican community, Celia Vice, though known for her work in civic and social organizations, also started the first Three Kings' Parade in Brooklyn in 1961. Evelina's organization, United Bronx Parents, frequently hosted cultural events, such as gatherings of traditional Puerto Rican *bomba* music and dance.

Although there are still many ways of showing off one's *puerotrriqueñidad*, nowadays it is less likely most of us will do it in our own homes and backyards. Many people will now attend events organized and sponsored by community organizations and cultural institutions. Traditionally during the Christmas season in Puerto Rico the caroling was done door to door with strolling musicians playing the guitar-like *cuatro* and the *pandereta* hand drums. While that is okay in a tropical setting, the harsh winter weather of New York City is pretty unforgiving on wooden instruments and drum skins. Therefore many people bring their families to places like El Museo del Barrio in East Harlem and the Clemente Soto Velez Cultural & Educational Center on the Lower East Side to celebrate the holidays and get their dose of holiday songs.

So those of us born and raised here in New York City celebrate Three Kings' Day, even though it is observed differently than it's done on the island, and our *vejigante* masks are worn for the Puerto Rican Day Parade instead of Carnival, yet we are still Puerto Rican; and we'd still be, even if born on the moon.

Elena Martínez, Folklorist
City Lore and the Bronx Music Heritage Center

*This is from the poem “Puerto Rican on the Moon/Boricua en la luna” by Juan Antonio Corretjer

The American Folklife Center was created by Congress in 1976 and placed at the Library of Congress to “preserve and present American Folklife” through programs of research, documentation, archival preservation, reference service, live performance, exhibition, public programs, and training. The Center includes the American Folklife Center Archive of folk culture, which was established in 1928 and is now one of the largest collections of ethnographic material from the United States and around the world. Please visit our web site:
<http://www.loc.gov/folklife/>

